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# Syed Ahmad Khan and Islamic Modernism

Dr Tabassum Kashmiri

The Muslims of the Indian sub-continent lost their vision of totality during the 18th–19th century. After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Muslim power in India had to face a sharp political decline, which resulted in the disintegration of their vision of totality in every sphere of life. The infra-structure of the Muslim society which had been completed during their reign in India collapsed and a serious confusion was meddling the harmony of the Muslim culture. After 1857, even their symbolic position of power was removed by the British imperialism. In these bitter circumstances Syed Ahmad appeared in the history of India as a great reformer and leader.

The real contribution of Syed Ahmad Khan lies in his ideas of the overall modernisation of the Muslim society in South Asia which had been in the process of decay for a long time. In order to achieve the objectives of the modernist movement, he started new organs and established new institutions to impart modern education to the coming generation. His magazine, *Tahzib UL Akhlaq* was one of such organs. It created a new horizon of culture and a new outlook of religion. It provided the Muslim society with a guide line towards modernism. His modernism comprised a new approach to religion, new philosophy, modern science, and the idea of progress. This magazine also confronted with the meshes of medieval society and successfully rooted out its evils, thus it provided the society with blessings of modernism. It greatly fertilised the mind of the South Asian people. The *Tahzib UL Akhlaq*, with its modern outlook, directed the Muslim polity to the right direction of enlightenment. This organ was the torchbearer of the new generation in South Asia, who emerged with creative concepts of their society after 1857.

Among main results of his modernism, the founding of Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College is deserving special mention. MAO College was the brain child of Syed Ahmad. The idea of this college was derived from the Oxford and the Cambridge universities. He visited England along with his son Syed Mahmood in 1869. In England, he carefully studied the system of British education, the advancement of science and technology, her culture and civilization, and also the system of government. He was greatly inspired by all these things, and decided there to establish an educational institution in India on the pattern of British universities and its cardinal objective was to impart the modern education among orthodox stratum of the Indian Muslims, who was deeply involved in obscurantism and was not ready to relinquish its medieval traditions. When he came back to India he laid before the nation

his thesis on modern education, culture, and the progress of the West and its fruits. With all his sincerity, he gave them a call to be united to achieve the objective of modern education which was a must for the progress of nation. A great opposition was raised by his countrymen, and Syed Ahmad had to face it and stem the strong tide of the obscuratists. But Syed Ahmad was very much confident of his strategy and he was fully determined to carry out his policies of education to elevate the downtrodden Muslim society. In the last quarter of the 19th century MAO College became a symbol of Muslim nationalism and a center of higher learning. According to Aziz Ahmad:

“It aimed at the liberalization of ideas, broad humanism, a scientific world view, and a pragmatic approach to politics. It soothed the transition of the younger generation of Muslim elite from almost medieval conservatism to least superficial modernism.”<sup>1)</sup>

As regards his concept of religion in India, he was of the opinion that Islam was not found in India in its true form as it was in its earlier days. He analyzed the historical evolution of Islam in India and this conclusion that many indigenous customs and traditions have merged into Islam and the people of that land believed in them as the true projection of Islam. Although it was entirely against the Islamic spirit and nothing to do with it. He referred in his works at so many places that such misleading concepts, which have given an unreal picture of Islam. Syed Ahmad came to his conclusion that such conditions were detrimental to Islamic ideology, because of their false postures of Islam.

Being a reformer, the eradication of such false traditions was his main objective. He tried his best to root out such evils with his staunch will. This situation was not only observed in India, but at that time on all over the Muslim world such images had distorted the true image of Islam. It was considered as a threatening situation, which the Islamic ideology was facing in that critical period. How to revive the true spirit of Islam was a challenge for the whole of the Muslim world. In that chaotic situation, Syed Ahmad declared that the Qur'an was the only direct source of true Islamic ideology. He made his stress on this fact that all other ideas which were not confirming to Qur'anic thought were unacceptable, as those were contrary to Islam.

The Muslims in India had followed blindly the concept of taqlid (Adherence). The philosophy of taqlid was against the evolutionary and progressive spirit of Islam. So far, taqlid was treated as the other name of Islam and so the Muslims had been compelled to follow this tradition and it was considered as the guide line of Islam. But taqlid was against the true spirit of Islam, because so many unauthenticated ideas became the part of taqlid. Syed Ahmad again gave a call to fight against this tradition which was destroying the true Islamic ideology. He had pointed out this evil in one of his letters to his close friend Nawab Mohsin Ul Mulk:

“Listen dear brother! This is not the time that I should conceal my conscience

from you. I tell you frankly that if people will not give up blind adherence (taqlid) and will not search out that particular light which can be had from the Qur'an and the reliable traditions of the Prophet and will not compare (? reconcile) with modern sciences the religion of Islam would disappear from India. This anxiety for the well-being of Islam has forced me to carry on all these researches and I do not care for the traditional rut. Otherwise you know well that in my view, to remain a Muslim and to be entitled for paradise it is enough to follow Maulvi Habbu, not to speak of the great jurists of Islam."<sup>2)</sup>

Syed Ahmad was also very critical over the discussions of traditions (Hadith). While making his comments on traditions, he expressed his concern over the matters of traditions. A lot of traditions, as he believed were fabricated by the enemies of Islam, and many others were not testified accordingly, so he developed his iddas to recast the new principles to reconsider the genuineness of traditions, which determine the reliability and authenticity of traditions. He framed some principles to check the reliability of these traditions.

- (1) All those traditions be granted as baseless which are contrary to the spirit of Islam.
- (2) All those traditions which are not confirmed with the established historical facts, mentioned in Qur'an are unreliable.
- (3) A tradition is not reliable, if it is against the spirit of natural observation and senses.
- (4) Those traditions which have the supernatural elements and are against the reason are also unacceptable.
- (5) All those traditions are unreliable which are against the dignity of prophethood.<sup>3)</sup>

In the period of Syed Ahmad a serious conflict between the religion and the modern sciences emerged. In this period no religious concept was considered genuine, unless it had the credibility of modern rationalism. It was creating confusion among the newly educated young Muslims, who came under the influence of modern philosophy. The science and philosophy had created suspicions of the existence of God and the concept of religion. The old Ilm al-Kalam (scholasticism) was unable to encounter the challenge of new philosophy. Syed Ahmad realized the alarming situation and its grim threat. In one of his speech he has discussed this stern situation.

"It was in the heyday of the Abbasid Caliphate that Greek philosophy and learning became popular among the Muslims. The result of that was that about many matters pertaining to Islam doubts began to arise in people's minds, because those who accepted the philosophical and scientific assertions of the Greeks and found them at variance with Islamic beliefs began to question the latter. That was a difficult time for Islam: not even an invasion by Islam's bitterest enemy could have threatened it greater harm than this insidious undermining of belief. The ulema then felt upon to come to Islam's aid, and

they did their best to defend and vindicate it.”

My friends, you know very well that at the present time modern philosophy and science are spreading among us. Their assertions are different from those of the ancients, but they equally inimical to the customary Islam professed today. There is, however, a big difference between modern knowledge and Greek knowledge. The philosophical assertions of the Greeks were for the most part based upon reasoning and speculation. Our ancestors could easily refute rational statements with rational arguments and speculative claims with speculative counter claims. But in the modern times hypotheses are verified by physical experimentation, and the experiments are demonstrable. So these can't be disposed of by mere speculative reasoning. We cannot combat them with the dialectical or polemical methods laid down by the ulema of earlier times.

For this reason we need at the present time a new science of apologetics with which we can falsify the statements of the modern sciences or at least cast doubts on them, or, in the alternative, establish consistency between them and Islamic doctrines. I am not acquainted with everybody present in this assembly; but I am sure that there among you here many learned people. I tell you truthfully that I regard those people who are capable of either reconciling the assertions of modern science and philosophy with the doctrines of Islam or proving them to be false and who are not, in spite of that, trying their best to do so-I tell you that I regard such people as sinners. Yes, I am sure they are sinners.”<sup>4)</sup>

Syed Ahmad had laid down the foundation of his *Ilm al-Kalam* on these pivotal principles.

The first postulate is that God is true and that the Qur'an is his word and, therefore, true and right. No truth of any science can falsify it; on the contrary, every truth of every science throws light on God and his word.

The second principle is that the work of God and the word of God, i.e. the Qur'an, cannot be at variance with each other. If they are, then, since the work of God is there for us to see and cannot be denied, it would seem to follow that the word of God is false (may God save us from this blasphemy!) Therefore it is essential that the two should be mutually consistent.

The third principle is that neither the work of God nor his word can be violated; but to think, as you seem to do, that this implies a detraction from God's absolute omnipotence is wrong and the result of a lack of comprehension. The fourth principle is whether you believe that man was made for religion, or whether you hold that religion was made for man, in either it is necessary that there should be in man, over and above those qualities which animals possess, some quality which makes it obligatory for him to carry the burdon of religion.

What is that quality? It is the faculty of reason. Thus it is necessary that whatever religion is enjoined upon him is not beyond human reason.<sup>5)</sup>

The cardinal point in his religious philosophy was to deal with all the religious matters with a profound modern rational outlook. So rationalism became the keynote of his religious thought. While discussing the need of modern *Ilm al-Kalam* he has made the stress on empirical reason. He belonged to the tradition of the 19th century's empirical reason, as Bashir Ahmad Dar has explained:

Sayyid Ahmad's "reason" was the empirical reason of the nineteenth century thought, the reason to which the Qur'an also appeals. It is the accumulated wisdom of mankind which crystallizes into what is usually called "common-sense". He defines it as inherent capacity in man by which he draws conclusion on the basis of the observation of objective phenomena or mental thinking process, and which proceeds from particulars to generalisations or vice versa ...It is this capacity of man which has enabled him to invent new things and led him on to understand and control the forces of Natures; it is by this that man is able to know things which are a source of his happiness and then tries to get as much as profit out of them as possible; it is this which makes a man ask the why and wherefrom of different events around him."<sup>6)</sup>

The thesis of his theological consciousness is also based upon the principle of movement in Islamic thought. He has reinterpreted the Islamic thought in its historical and evolutionary process. In this process the Islamic thought is reinterpreted according to the development of society and its requirements. He strongly believed that if the Islamic thought is not re-interpreted according to the requirements of the society, it would lead to stagnation, which could weaken the idea of movement in Islamic thought. So, he always stressed on the principle of movement and considered it as an imperative for the promotion of the Muslim culture.

The religious ideas of Syed Ahmad were not quite new. These were derived from the writings of different scholars of the different periods of Muslim history. It was a profound contribution of Syed Ahmad to reelaborate and reconsolidate these ideas in a new form.

The movement started by him for the social reforms and the liberation of the Muslim society from the medieval evils invited a violent condemnation raised by the orthodoxy of his period for the suppression of his missionary objectives which were regarded as anti-Islamic.

The religious ideas of Syed Ahmad have been criticised not only by the orthodox Muslim scholars, but a number of enlightend scholars (who appreciate his movement) have made criticism on his rational concepts. Most of them have expressed their views that Syed Ahmad had taken an extreme line in the formation of his ideas. Some of them have raised objections against his rationalism and his stress on scientific approach towards religion. They believe that the religion is an eternal reality, but the scientific reality is not eternal, it can be changed because of new findings in the scientific theories. His strong stress on rationalism also negates

the concept of intuition in the religion. This concept is again contrary to the established realities of mysticism.

Syed Ahmad developed his modern outlook in literature, education, journalism, religion, culture and in other spheres of life and also took his radical attitudes as to the reform of the existing social pattern of society. As a reformer, he was not only successful in the transformation of cultural contents of an orthodox and fundamentalist society which was not ready to accept his conception of modernisation, but aspired to cast a new infra-structure of the Muslim society on the basis of his ideas.

#### Notes

- 1) Ahmad, Aziz, *Islamic Modernism In India And Pakistan*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1967) P. 37.
- 2) Nizami, K. A., Sayyid Ahmad Khan, (Delhi: Publications Division Ministry Of Information & Broadcast-int, 1980) P. 122.
- 3) Ahmad, Syed, *Maqalat-e-Sir Syed*, vol. I. (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi-e- Adab, 1962) Pp. 29-34.
- 4) Hasan, Hadi, Syed Ahmad Khan, (Lahore: Institute Of Islamic Culture, 1970) PP. 167-168.
- 5) Ibid, PP. 173-174.
- 6) Dar, Bashir Ahmad, *Religious Thought of Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, (Lahore: Institute Of Islamic Culture, 1957) P. 161.